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## Right Wing Populism and Hip Hop Music in Norway

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## Abstract

The relationship between the Norwegian cultural field at large and the Norwegian right wing populist Progress Party has been, and still is, characterized by enduring antagonism. Norwegian hip hop music is arguably the form of artistic expression through which antipathy towards the Progress Party (*the FRP*) is most explicitly articulated. This article situates this antagonism in the wider political and sociocultural context of Norway. It further outlines how the practices and aesthetics typical of the Norwegian hip hop scene facilitate antagonism against the FRP, and how this antagonism plays out in the public sphere. In conclusion this study discusses these public intersections in light of the FRP's populist claim to be victimized by the mainstream media and cultural sector.

## Contributor Note

Torgeir Uberg Nærland is a post-doctoral fellow at the Department of information science and media studies at the University of Bergen. His research mainly focuses on political dimensions of expressive culture, music in particular, and further, how we may understand the role of aesthetics within political theory. He has published on these subjects such journals as *The Javnost*, *Popular Communication* and *Popular Music*.

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*I've got matchsticks, bring a can of petrol  
/ Lets lighten up a FpU-dude*

Translated excerpt from hip hop act  
Karpe Diem's song 'OK' (2008).<sup>1</sup>

*These guys have obviously grown to hate  
the Progress Party. Last time they rapped  
about setting fire to members of the  
Progress Party's youth wing (FpU). Now it's  
the minister of justice they give abuse.*

The Progress Party politician Peter  
Myhre's public response (*Dagbladet*  
05.11.2015) to hip hop act Karpe Diem's  
song 'Being a rebel in your own  
basement flat is easy'.<sup>2</sup>

Having long been largely a subcultural phenomenon hip hop has for the past decade grown to be one the most popular musical genres in Norway (Gramo 2012; 2013; 2014). It is also a genre that appeals to broad socio-cultural segments of the Norwegian society (Gripsrud et al. 2011). Yet, at the same time hip hop artists frequently release songs carrying explicit and often hyperbolic criticism of the politicians and ideology of the right-wing populist Progress Party. Several of these songs have received extensive attention in the Norwegian public sphere, and on many occasions provoked heated public discourse. In 2015 for instance, one of the most popular hip hop bands in Norway, Karpe Diem, released the song 'Lett å være rebell i kjellerleiligheten din' (Being a rebel in your own basement flat

is easy) which carried explicit lyrical critique of the FRP's immigration policy. In the song, the Progress Party's minister of justice was also labeled 'a coward' (feiging). In response the profiled FRP-politician Peter Myhre publically declared that the song was a 'piece of filth' (svineri) and should not be considered music at all (*Dagbladet* 05.11.2015). According to Myhre the song was, in reality, political agitation camouflaged as music. Whereas music should be made 'out of joy' he argued, Karpe Diem's song 'made out of hate'. In support of Myhre the leader of the FRP's youth wing declared that musicians should concentrate on music, not politics (*Dagbladet* 06.11.2015). At the same time, Karpe Diem's song was widely celebrated among both critics and the public – not least *because* of the song's explicit politics. The reviewer from the public broadcaster (the NRK), for instance, described the song as 'Raising consciousness to prejudice swept in brilliant pop tunes'. (*P3.no* 05.11.2015). In an even more salutary review from the biggest tabloid in Norway, *Verdens Gang* (05.11.2015), the lyrics were described as 'extremely timely'.

This recent example actualizes several pertinent aspects of the relationship between the FRP and Norwegian hip hop. For one, the example is illustrative of the enduring antagonistic relationship between the FRP and major artists on the Norwegian hip hop scene, and how they frequently intersect in the public sphere. Further, the example is indicative of the depreciation of explicitly political art by the FRP. This, in turn, is connected to the party's longstanding claim that the cultural field in general is infused by left-wing ideology and populated by left-leaning artists – or what the political right in Norway has labeled 'the cultural

<sup>1</sup> From Karpe Diem's album *Fire Vegger* (2008)  
Bonnier Amigo

<sup>2</sup> The song 'Being a rebel in your own basement flat is easy' (Lett å være rebell i kjellerleiligheten din) from the album *Heisann Montebello* (2016)  
TOM

hegemony of the ideological left'. Considering the overall celebratory media reception of the song, it is also an example that brings into attention the often-hostile public climate in which FRP-politicians operate when they engage with explicitly political popular music. It is thus an example that actualises one of the key tenets in populist rhetoric: that populist parties and 'the people' they claim to represent are victimised by the established media and cultural sector (Mudde 2007).

This article explores and discusses the nature and significance of the antagonistic intersections between the FRP and hip hop music. It outlines how the characteristics of the hip hop scene and the hip hop aesthetic facilitate such intersections, as well as how these intersections unfold in the public sphere. However, these intersections do not take place in a socio-cultural vacuum. These are, for one, entwined with the ways in which the FRP engages with the cultural field in general. More specifically, culture – high and low – becomes the focal point for the rhetorical mobilization of the people-elite narrative central to political populism. Further, this hostility between the FRP and the cultural field is also connected to more general socio-cultural background conditions, and the divergent tastes, lifestyles and aesthetic sensibilities that come with them.

Consequently, the politico-aesthetical antagonism between hip hop and the FRP needs to be considered as the result of a number of interlocking factors. In this article I draw on a number of earlier empirical studies that, together, allow me to analyze the different aspects that contribute to this antagonistic relation. A first section sketches the FRP as a populist party, and discusses how culture

constitutes a key arena on which the party's populism plays out. A second section draws on a survey of musical taste to situate the antagonism between the FRP and the cultural scene in the broader socio-cultural context of taste cultures. A third section moves on to a discussion of hip hop specifically. It draws on interviews with hip hop artists to show how hip hop has taken the FRP as one of its prime targets of political criticism and how this relates to the characteristics of the hip hop scene. Drawing upon musical analysis of hip hop music this section further outlines how the musical language of hip hop enables criticism of the FRP and provoke public discourse. In the fourth and fifth sections, I analyze two controversial cases to show how the antagonism between hip hop and the FRP plays out in the Norwegian public sphere, and further discuss these intersections in light of the FRP's populist claim to be victimized by the media and the cultural sector.

### **Political context: The FRP, cultural policy and 'the cultural elite'**

In this section I contextualize the antagonistic intersections between the FRP and hip hop artists by first locating the FRP within the wider terrain of European populism and then show how culture in general, and cultural policy specifically, has functioned as a key arena on which the FRP has mobilized its populist anti-elite narrative. Compared to right wing populist parties in Scandinavia and continental Europe, the FRP must be considered a 'light' version. It is one of the few right-wing populist parties that have formed government – currently (as of March 2016) in a coalition government with the Conservatives (Høyre). The

ambiguous status of the FRP is reflected in chartings of European populist parties; whereas political scientist Mudde (2007) did not include the FRP in his analysis, Van Kessel for instance (2015: 90) does. Comparing the FRP with the other Nordic populist parties political scientists Jungar and Jupskås (2014: 216) comment:

Being less authoritarian and more economically right-wing compared to the three other parties, yet equally anti-establishment and anti-immigration, this party is probably best seen as a hybrid between a PRR party and a more traditional conservative party.

Nonetheless, in the same analysis the authors (232) conclude that in sharing a strong anti-immigration and populist profile, the FRP should be included as the *functional equivalent* of populist right wing parties elsewhere. However, the FRP must be considered significantly less aggressive in its nativist rhetoric and ideology than other European populist right wing parties in for instance France, the Netherlands or Hungary.

Public discourse about cultural policy constitutes a key site through which the party rhetorically mobilises notions of a (cultural) elite. In keeping with its populist orientation, artists operating within the sphere of high culture have made up a constitutive adversary in their political narrative. Yet, cultural policy has neither been a prioritised area for the FRP<sup>3</sup>, nor

an area where they have had much actual impact (Hylland 2011). All the same, their cultural policy is alongside their immigration policy, arguably the issue that has drawn the most extensive and aggressive critique. As Hylland (2011: 51) points out

One the one hand, FRP has represented the most visible and loud opposition to a cultural policy that (in Norway) is to a large degree marked by consensus. On the other hand, FRP's stance on cultural policy is most often made visible by an almost unanimous criticism.

Significantly, cultural policy has constituted a rhetorical arena in which the FRP has demonstrated *difference* from the other parties and where the FRP has positioned itself as being in line with the opinions and tastes of 'the ordinary people' (*folk flest*).

Epitomized by the rhetorical trope *kultureliten* ('the cultural elite'), the FRP has evoked images of the state-financed cultural sector as being decadent, parasitical and out of tune with the tastes of ordinary people. A reoccurring claim has been that artists operating within the sphere of high culture do not produce anything of relevance to most people, yet still have 'a straw into the public purse' (*sugerør i statskassa*). An infamous and telling example of how the FRP rhetorically demonstrates difference from 'the cultural elite' and disdain for high culture was when the then-profiled FRP-politician Jan Simonsen suggested that the National Theater should be

<sup>3</sup> Some key cultural policy-features can be identified through their political platform (*Prinsippprogram 2013-2017*). In accordance with their market-liberal orientation the FRP champions drastically reduced public financial support for cultural production. Moreover, the party is the only one in Norway that states that they want to fully privatise the publically funded

broadcaster the NRK – National Broadcasting Corporation (*Handlingsprogram 2013-2017*: 83). The FRP also emphasises the importance of preserving the Norwegian cultural heritage.

converted into a disco (see Hylland 2011: 61). Not surprisingly, a survey of all employees and board members of 250 institutions in the cultural sector (Hovden and Knapskog 2014) found that less than one percent voted FRP and that the cultural field is mainly populated by actors with left- or centrist political leanings.

Moreover, these rhetorical ventures have routinely provoked response from artists and other actors from the cultural field. These responses have constructed the FRP as uncultured and as an enemy of the arts. In 2009 for instance, several hundred Norwegian artists and cultural workers signed the petition *Kulturkampen* (the battle of culture), in which a number of highly profiled writers, actors and musicians urged the public not to vote the FRP in the upcoming election (*NRK.no* 18.08.2009; *Kulturkampen.no*). Although this petition also included a few artists of broad popularity, the petition mainly included artists associated with what could be considered high culture. There are a number of further examples where artists antagonized against the FRP in a highly public manner. In 2009 for instance, novelist Erik Fosnes Hansen threw a paper ball at his fellow radio-interviewee Per Arne Olsen – the then deputy leader of the FRP (*NRK.no* 12.07.2009). Similarly, in 2011 actor Ane Dahl Torp was quoted in a national tabloid saying that ‘the FRP is stupid and mean’ (*Dagbladet.no* 14.12.2011). These reoccurring public quarrels between artists associated with high culture and actors from the FRP is a dynamic that undoubtedly has served the FRP well in establishing a public narrative in which they construct themselves as being in opposition to the state-sponsored and condescending elite.

As a rhetorical strategy this antagonism has been important in providing FRP politicians with a *charisma* (Adair-Toteff 2005) of what I would term ‘spectacular commonness’ (spektakulær folkelighet). This is a charisma in which the aesthetic values and tastes associated with cultural expressions and institutions of low cultural legitimacy are endorsed and accentuated to be the true values and tastes of ‘the people’. At the same time, and in line with the country’s strong egalitarian legacy, an all-round defining characteristic of Norwegian politicians has been the nurturing of a charisma of ‘conspicuous modesty’ (Dalož 2007; Krogstad and Storvik 2007). In this climate of competing claims to ordinariness, matters of culture and taste become all the more important. Thus, for instance, both the FRP and the social democrat Labour Party – which also fashions itself as a ‘people’s party’ (folkeparti) and partly compete for the same voters – have actively associated with artists of broad and people-oriented appeal.<sup>4</sup>

Hip hop music and artists do not fit easily into the FRP’s narrative of a condescending cultural elite. Hip hop is widely popular, commercially successful and appeals to wide segments of the Norwegian population – by means of a popular aesthetic. Thus, when hip hop artists publically express anti-FRP sentiments they cannot easily be bracketed off as an elite inherently hostile to the FRP and ‘the people’. In

<sup>4</sup> The FRP in 2009, for instance, released its own election campaign CD *Politisk ukorrekt* (Politically incorrect) containing for the most songs from dance band artists. Jens Stoltenberg, then Labour PM, in 2012 publicised his Spotify playlist, containing a number of artists of broad appeal, including also party rock bands such as DDE.



comparison, this strategy has been highly successful when for example literary writers or filmmakers have issued critique of the FRP and its policies. This brings into attention an overarching and significant aspect of the relationship between popular music and political populism as this unfolds in Norway. Analytically these are not easily comparable entities. Yet, although in very different ways, both popular music and political populism lay claims to or have a rooting in *the popular* – that which attends to the tastes and sensibilities of most people (see also De Cleen and Carpentier 2010). The success of populist parties like the FRP partly stems from their claim to represent the popular. Thus, the political practises of widely popular musical genres such as hip hop represent a real challenge to the people-elite narrative inherent to political populism, or more precisely: the *credibility* of this narrative.

### **Socio-cultural context: the interrelation between cultural tastes, political orientations and aesthetic sensibilities**

As will be highlighted in this section, these antagonisms between actors from the cultural field and from the FRP are not merely constructs of political rhetoric and style; they also resonate in social and cultural disparities among the Norwegian population at large. A number of Bourdieu-inspired studies of cultural taste and socio-economic background in Norway make evident that a political orientation towards the FRP systematically forms part of lifestyles (Bourdieu 1984) that also entail specific taste orientations. In a large-scale longitudinal study of university students, Gripsrud et al. (2011: 526) found that a political orientation towards the FRP

correlates with little knowledge of and interest in traditional legitimate culture, to taste for popular culture of low legitimacy, and to low economic and cultural capital relative to the overall student population. Similarly, Jarness (2015; forthcoming) found that an orientation towards legitimate cultural expressions connects to political left leanings, whereas less pronounced interest in arts and (high) culture connects to political right leanings among middle class strata in urban Norway.

Significantly, Jarness' (forthcoming) study also documents how the relationship between various socio-economic groups is characterized by mutual symbolic boundary making. Identifying commonly circulated stereotypes among the Norwegian middle class, Jarness finds that the left leaning 'cultural elite' considers the 'the rich' to be vulgar, tasteless and shallow. Conversely, 'the rich' consider the 'cultural elite' to be elitist and pretentious. Both these groups, in turn, consider the 'lower class types' to be vulgar and ordinary. Further, 'the lower class types' are ascribed dubious moral and political values – in which an affinity for the FRP is likely to be a distinctive component. These socially circulated stereotypes thus resonate with those mobilized in public political discourse. Which one comes first – discourse at social or at public level – is not a question this article aims to tackle. However, this resonance makes it plausible to argue that the symbolic boundary-making found at the social level and the rhetorical antagonism found at the public-discursive level are mutually informative.



A quantitative survey study (N=461) of musical taste and attitudes to music among young politicians in Norway carried out by the author offers further insight into how these antagonisms manifest themselves on the *political* field (for method and material, see Nærland forthcoming). The findings from this study indicate that the political left maintains a generally *politicized aesthetic*, whereas the right, and the FRP in specific, maintain an *apolitical aesthetic*. Politicians of the left make substantial connections between the music they listen to and their own political engagement. They connect their own

music is appreciated when it is a-political.

The rejection, or rather misrecognition, of the idea that music can be ideologically significant, was most pronounced among the members of the FRP's youth wing. Generally, for them the sphere of culture and the sphere of politics should remain separated. The aesthetic sensibilities and attitudes towards music as political expression found on the political left and right gravitate towards the dichotomies in Table 1.<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, this study also shows that

Ideological orientation	Left	Right
Attributes of musical taste		
Level of political explicitness	Explicitly political	A-political
Adherence to music industry	'Alternative'	'Commercial'
Aesthetic mode	Disruptive	Pleasant
Attitudes towards music as politically relevant		
Music as politically significant	Endorsement	Rejection
Explicitly expressed politics	Endorsement	Rejection
Artists political-biographical narrative	Endorsement	Rejection
Youth wings of political parties as taste communities	Recognition	Rejection

*Table 1: Aesthetic sensibilities and attitudes towards music as political expression*

political orientation to both the politics of lyrics and the political affiliation of artists, and also hold music to inspire their own political engagement. Politicians of the right only to a minimal degree make such connections. They even explicitly refuse that music and politics *should* have anything to do with each other. And, whereas politicians of the left gravitate towards an aesthetic sensibility in which music is good *because* it is politically expressive, politicians of the right gravitate towards a sensibility in which

politically committed hip hop occupies a privileged position among members of the left wing parties (and the Marxist Red Youth in particular). Politicians of the left reported a high preference for explicitly political hip hop acts, and also indicated that hip hop music in various ways has had significance for their political

<sup>5</sup> Reproduced from Nærland, T.U (forthcoming) Music, Ideology and Emerging Political Elites: A Survey of Musical Taste and Aesthetic Sensibilities among Young Politicians in Norway, *Praktiske Grunde: Nordisk tidsskrift for kultur- og samfundsvidenskab*

engagement. Members of the FRP's youth wing, on the other hand, indicated low if any preference for explicitly political hip hop music. Important to note though, more chart-based and less overtly political hip hop and R'n'B was popular among members of all parties.

### **Musical context: The hip hop scene and aesthetic**

In the following I will attend to the politics of the hip hop scene itself and more specifically the role of the FRP therein. A first sub-section outlines the political sensibilities that characterize the hip hop scene in Norway. A second sub-section then zooms in on how the hip hop aesthetic enables the musical articulation of anti-FRP sensibilities.

#### *The Norwegian hip hop scene and the FRP*

The Norwegian hip hop scene can be seen to share an aesthetical-political sensibility where hostility towards the FRP is an integrated component. This hostility may be explained in terms of the following factors. First, the hip hop scene is part of a general artistic *culture* in Norway with antagonism towards the FRP is an integrated part. This is an antagonism that is ingrained in lifestyle, rather than a product of a political program. Being against the FRP, pronounced or not, is a given, or in Bourdieuan terms: it is *doxa* on the musical field. Secondly, the scene's historically rooted self-understanding as 'underground', and its generic identification, contrived or not, with 'the outsiders' or the marginalised, sets it on a course of collision with the FRP's politics. The FRP advocates a strict law-

and-order policy, it is the party that has most ardently championed radically stricter immigration- and integration policies, and it has fronted stricter welfare policies. In fronting these policies the FRP has rhetorically evoked images of criminals, immigrants and benefit-claimers alike as *the others* – as opposed to the honest and decent 'ordinary man'. The hip hop scene, for its part shares a certain sense of commitment to thematise such otherness sympathetically. Thirdly, whereas the FRP is popularly associated with ethno-cultural nationalism, the hip hop scene is characterised by a self-understanding as multicultural and urban. This is partly due to the genre's Afro-American origins, but also because hip hop music is highly popular among minority youth and also adopted as an art form among minority performers in Norway.

Generally speaking, the hip hop scene is thus characterised by a shared, yet non-programmatic, hostility towards the FRP. In an interview study of key actors on the Norwegian hip hop scene – including rappers and critics – carried out by the author, this hostility becomes evident (Nærland, 2014b, for a list of informants see Appendix 3). Critic and hip hop historian Øyvind Holen understands this hostility as part of the cultural field's general antagonism against the FRP, and further reflects.

The politics of Norwegian hip hop is somewhat diffuse. It is mostly about specific cases related to crime, racism, and also to the FRP. (...) Norwegian rappers are on the same side. There are no FRP-rappers. There is no one rapping about throwing out the Muslims or cutting out their native language education.

This is the way it is on the musical field in general. (Personal interview, May 2012)

A common reflection among the informants is that the typical hip hop performer in one way or the other, yet with highly varying degrees of pronounced commitment, operates within a social and political universe characterised by values and perspectives loosely associated with the political left. This is not to say that members of the scene share a political program – for that Norwegian hip hop is too fragmented and too diverse. This leftist orientation should rather be considered an enduring and also dominant *current* within Norwegian hip hop.

Moreover, a significant aspect of the politics of the Norwegian scene is the identification with *outsider* positions. As rapper Lars Vaular reflects:

I'm very preoccupied by telling the stories about those who struggle and those who haven't gotten what they deserve. As such, I have a classical hip hop perspective on things – teaming up with the outsiders and telling the stories of those who aren't allowed to do so themselves. (Personal interview, May 2012)

Giving evidence of this identification with outsiders, Knudsen (2008) draws on ethnographic studies of amateur hip hop production in Norway to show that hip hop artists identify as 'underground' – an identity position constructed in opposition to the 'mainstream' and the majority-society. However, the conception that hip hop music in Norway unanimously represents marginalised or minority experience, should be problematized. Critic Martin

Bjørnersen, for instance, contends that the self-understanding on the scene as representing the underprivileged is 'false' and that the scene is dominated by ethnically Norwegian actors.

Hip hop isn't an outsider culture today, yet the scene keeps itself with an image as an outsider culture – this is of course a false self-image.(...) One has always wanted hip hop to represent immigrants, but the reality is, at least in Oslo, that hip hop is pretty segregated. Particularly the political hip hop scene – it isn't exactly multicultural. (Personal interview, May 2012)

None the less, as one of the other informants contends: 'The issue of racism is a theme that runs as a thread through Norwegian hip hop since its beginning'. 'False' self-understandings or not, a defining characteristic of Norwegian hip hop music in Norway has been and still is the sympathetic attendance to issues of minority experience.

### *The hip hop aesthetic: the musical enabling of FRP-critique*

A number of studies (see for instance Walser 1995; Rose 1994; Nærlund 2014b) have shown how hip hop music may function as a powerful vehicle for the articulation of political sentiments and opinions. For one, the centrality of *rapping* within the hip hop aesthetic allows, perhaps more than any other popular musical genre, for the verbalisation of criticism against the FRP. Second, hip hop lyrics often address socio-political conditions. As critic Øyvind Holen comments, whereas lyrics are often primarily of a thematically personal

nature, the genre often implies a lyrical scope that extends into issues of public and societal relevance.

There is such an amount of lyrical content in hip hop that you will inevitably end up saying something about the society around you. (...) It's very much about describing one's life. Hip hop songs are not party programs, but are very often oriented towards the problems of everyday life. And everyday problems are in a sense highly political. (Personal interview, May 2012)

Thirdly, lyrical hyperbole is central to the genre aesthetic, thus allowing for criticism that is also 'loud' and provocative. These 'shock'-tactics, be it through profanity, exaggeration or graphic description, may work to draw (public) attention to the songs and their lyrical messages.

Fourthly, the multi-layered, rhythmically accentuated musical underscore, *the beat*, is in itself important as it constitutes the rhythmic foundation for the rappers delivery of his/her messages. The interplay between rhythm, rapping and performance must be seen as a significant aspect of what makes hip hop a potent form of political expression. When good, hip hop beats reinforce the rhymes and enhance the role of the rapper. Hence, the lyrical message of the song is 'amplified' and the rapper is established as (public) speaker. The *flow* – the way the rapper rhythmically engages with the beat – is vital in ensuring both the persuasive and the aesthetically enticing delivery of the lyrics (see Krims 2000; Nærlund 2015c). The flow is also an important aspect of how hip hop music works as political communication as it rhetorically

emphasises, energises and draws attention to key lyrical points. Moreover, the dramatic, melodic and rhythmic qualities of the musical score are themselves highly significant as they may invest political discourse with a sense of drama, humour, affective force and energy, all of which may engage audiences beyond the confines of traditional political communication.

### Hip hop and the *public* articulation of anti-FRP sentiment

In this section I analyse a specific case that exemplifies how the anti-FRP sentiments of the hip hop scene are articulated in the public sphere, and how the hip hop aesthetic gives shape to such articulations. In doing so the case also highlights how the mass mediation of hip hop music occasionally engages FRP politicians and sympathisers in public debate. Rapper Lars Vaular's song 'Who Shot Siv Jensen' (Kem Skjøt Siv Jensen), released in 2010, offers one of the most striking examples of the articulation of anti-FRP sentiment through hip hop music. Moreover, the song became subject to extensive public attention both in terms of news articles, reviews, commentary and also debate (see appendix 1 for examples). 'Who shot Siv Jensen' is a fictional and satirical story about the identification of suspects from the shooting of Siv Jensen – the party leader of the FRP and currently minister of finance.<sup>6</sup> The emblematic chorus goes as following:

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<sup>6</sup> This analysis is based on in-depth musical and lyrical analysis previously undertaken by the author (for method and analysis see Nærlund 2014b).



*Kem skjøt Siv Jensen? Vet du ka han heter?*

*Fra syv og en halv meter*

*No e snuten ute å leter*

*De spør, de spør, men vet du ka han heter?*

*Who shot Siv Jensen? Do you know his name?*

*From seven and a half meters*

*Now the cops are out searchin'*

*They ask, they ask, but do you know his name?*

Crucial to the lyrical narrative, it is at the end of the song revealed to us that Siv Jensen was in fact not shot dead. Actually, her head was 'so thick that the bullet just bounced off'.

Although the song, like most hip hop songs, includes a series of lyrical kicks in many directions, the song unmistakably articulates an antipathy towards the FRP. It does so, for instance, by sympathising with 'outsiders' such as immigrants and persons suffering from mental illness while at the same time holding forth that Siv Jensen is both *steinhard* (rock hard) and *iskald* (ice cold). These adjectives refer to Siv Jensen's personality and politics. Siv Jensen is so hard and cold that shooting her was like 'throwing a marble at her forehead'. But most importantly, the song functions as a political anthem in which anti-FRP sentiments are energised and given affective force by means of rhythmical, melodic and timbral effects. Unlike for instance political speeches, it is an example of FRP-critical political discourse with an unmistakable sing-along quality. The explicit critique of Siv Jensen's policy and persona in the lyrical verses combined with audiences' pre-conceptions of the politics of the hip hop genre, firmly anchors the song in an anti-

FRP universe. In loudly, yet ironically, suggesting that Siv Jensen was assassinated, the song makes rhetorical use of shock and sensationalism. This rhetoric of hyperbole and exaggeration, typical of hip hop, must in turn be regarded as pivotal to the public attention and discourse hip hop music occasionally generates.

The initial reception of the song focused on the 'shock'-quality of the lyrics, including headlines in national newspapers such as 'Raps about the attempted assassination of Siv Jensen', 'Shoots Siv Jensen', or 'Raps about Siv Jensen-murder'. Moreover, the song was immediately identified as anti-FRP and as a FRP-ridicule. Several of the news stories included excerpts of the lyrics, or even the lyrics in full. Subsequently, several high profile public figures made statements (mainly through various interviews) about the acceptability of the lyrics. Among them were profiled right wing politicians, including the FRP's MP Mette Hanekamhaug and The Conservatives' MP Andre Oktay Dahl. Both these politicians placed the song within the realm of satire, and argued that the song should be considered an example of legitimate political expression.

Former Oslo police-chief Finn Abrahamsen, however, argued that the song might contribute to the increasing pressure on politicians' security, and that the Norwegian security service (PST) probably followed the situation. In addition there were a number of heated debates in the commentary fields of newspaper websites where Vaular was taken to encourage assassinations of right wing politicians. In response, Vaular pointed out in several interviews that Siv Jensen was in fact not killed in the lyrical

narrative, and that the song was intended as a piece of satire. Fellow Norwegian rappers, including Karpe Diem and Gatas Parlament, also publically defended Vaular's right to be crass and lyrically explicit within his own creative universe and within the conventions of satire. Karpe Diem argued that the song was both timely and important, given the alienating effect that the FRP's racially and socially stereotyped rhetoric has on many Norwegians of immigration background. Thus, compared to most popular musical songs in Norway 'Who shot Siv Jensen' was subjected to extensive and politicized reception. The reasons for this are manifold. The most important ones are the hyperbolic lyrics and explicit politics of the song, Lars Vaular's growing popularity and critical acclaim, as well as his management's promotional efforts.

However, the role of the license-funded national public broadcaster – the NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Service) – was also instrumental in throwing the song into national attention. Prior to the album release, 'Who shot Siv Jensen' figured as one of the headlines in the regular NRK Television nine o'clock newscast, in which excerpts from a live performance of the song were included. The newscast also included an interview with Lars Vaular himself (contending that he was not doing this for the sake of attention), FRP's party secretary Geir Mo (responding that FRP considered the song as a crass yet legitimate expression of political opinion), and the editor of *Lydverket* – the televised music program that initially recorded and broadcast the performance – (arguing that it was editorially legitimate to broadcast the song, in spite of its explicit lyrics). The NRK is by far the most important broadcaster in Norway in terms of

market share and size of audience (Medienorge 2016), with its nine-o clock newscasts reaching a vast audience. Moreover, the NRK, and its newscasts in particular, enjoy a high level of trust, and are the number-one agenda-setter among the Norwegian broadcasters. The NRK also framed the song as a provocative and political piece of hip hop, thus preparing the ground for the subsequent politicized reception. Hence, the news feature about the song not only put the song on the public agenda, but it also invested the song with political and cultural relevance far beyond what is common for popular musical songs.

### **Hip hop and the contestation of the ideological balance on the cultural field**

The role of the NRK in the case of 'Who shot Siv Jensen', brings into attention an overarching, yet largely empirically unsubstantiated, criticism voiced by the political right in Norway: the so-called 'cultural hegemony of the ideological left'. This is an issue that has received enduring attention in Norwegian public and political discourse for the past decades. The argument is that both the media (not least the public broadcaster NRK), the press and the cultural sector, are infused by left wing ideology and populated by left-leaning actors. This, in turn, is said to cause a left wing bias in the overall symbolic representation of matters of political and ideological significance. For example, the long-time party-leader of the FRP, Carl I Hagen has repeated countless times that the true name of the national broadcaster should not be the NRK, but *the ARK* – which translates as The Labour Party's

Broadcasting Corporation.<sup>7</sup> The role of the public broadcaster NRK in staging and legitimizing FRP-critical hip hop thus feeds into the FRP's longstanding populist anti-elite trope of being victimized by the established media and the cultural sector.

The next case exemplifies more explicitly how hip hop music occasionally becomes the focal point for the FRP's contestations of the ideological balance on the cultural field. Moreover, it makes evident how such contestations are energised due to contextual factors such as political climate and critical societal events. When hip hop act Karpe Diem released the song 'Magdi's Toyota' (Toyotan til Magdi) in 2012, the public response was considerably more intense and extensive than that following the release of 'Who Shot Siv Jensen'. Commentators, such as political scientist Svein Tuastad, argued that the controversy that the song sparked was one of that summer's major public debates in Norway (*Mandag Morgen* 26.0812). The song included a lyrical description of oral sex with a young profiled female FRP-politician, and provoked heated public discourse among commentators, journalists and FRP-politicians alike (for examples, see appendix 2). At the same time 'Magdi's Toyota' received overall highly positive reviews, and the full album, of which the song was a single, earned them a Grammy award in 2012.

As documented in a previous analysis of the media reception of 'Magdi's Toyota' (Nærlund 2015b) the highly politicised reception of the song, and the response

it provoked among FRP-politicians, must be understood as a consequence of the interplay between a number of different factors. Karpe Diem's well-known affiliation with radical left wing collectives in Oslo and their past and frequent lyrical antagonism against the FRP are significant factors here. Yet more importantly, the immediate contemporary cultural and political context was instrumental in investing the song with provocative power. Prior to Karpe Diem's release of 'Magdi's Toyota', the band had played a most prominent role in the public mourning concerts following the Utøya-massacre. Here, right wing extremist Anders Behring Breivik carried out a massacre in and around Oslo on 22 July 2011, which involved the killing of a total of 77 people. The grand majority of them were young aspiring politicians from the Labour Party's youth wing. A main motivation behind the massacre was Behring Breivik's disdain for the increasingly multi-cultural make-up of the Norwegian society – for which he held the Labour Party responsible. The subsequent mourning ceremonies were broadcasted by the NRK and widely covered by most national and regional news media. These mourning ceremonies constituted *media events* in the sense that they involved a highly affective spectatorship of a vast national audience. Both members of Karpe Diem are partly of Asian and north African origins, and their prominent role in these media events catapulted them into the role of national icons of the multicultural future of Norway. In unison, the press also celebrated them as such. In this period the political climate in Norway was geared towards unity rather than conflict.

When Karpe Diem released 'Magdi's Toyota', approximately a year after the

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<sup>7</sup> The social democrat Labour Party has been a dominating force in Norwegian parliamentary politics from the second world and onwards.

massacre, this phase of reconciliation and mourning was over, and the political climate in Norway had once again become more conflict-oriented. In this more conflictual phase, and the rhetorical situation (Bitzer 1968) that subsequently arose, Karpe Diem became an opportune focal point for the political right's challenging of the cultural hegemony of the left. For instance, in a letter to the editor of the national tabloid *Dagbladet* (02.08.2012) entitled 'Rapping about torture and murder' Christer Kjølstad (a member of the FRP's youth wing) accused Karpe Diem of being 'leftist glorifiers of violence'. Similarly, Peter N. Myrhe, a national FRP figure and MP, followed up with an interview entitled 'Boycott Karpe Diem!' (*TV2.no*, 08.08.2012). Subsequently, local and regional FRP-politicians echoed Kjølstad and Myrhe's critique and urged audiences and concert arrangers to boycott Karpe Diem (see for instance *Rogalands Avis*, 10.08.2012; 15.08.2012). The main argument from the FRP-politicians was that Karpe Diem's status as national icons of multicultural tolerance was altogether false and misplaced, as they lyrically encouraged both political violence and misogyny. From their perspective, Karpe Diem's part in the media events following 22nd July involved the manifestation of the cultural hegemony of the left and the temporary 'sanctification' of left-leaning artists such as Karpe Diem. Several of the politicians also emphasised that FRP is an easy and convenient target for attack from musicians, and that Karpe Diem would never have achieved the same status had they agitated against members of the Labour Party's youth wing.

The critique from the FRP also generated response from Patel and Abdelmaguid of

Karpe Diem. In an op-ed in *Dagbladet* (11.08.2012) titled 'When did we start to interpret all lyrics literally?' they argued that their use of explicit lyrics, including exaggeration, irony and sarcasm, are linguistic devices used to express a 'deep disagreement' with FRP-politics, and must further be understood within the context of the hip hop genre. The controversy also sparked response in publications and from commentators more loosely associated with the political left. However, whereas the critique and commentary from the right were aggressive in tone, the response from journalists and commentators affiliated with the left were less confrontational in tone. A telling example is a commentary by Charlotte Myrbråten, writing for the socialist newspaper *Klassekampen* (21.01.2013). This commentary recognises that aggressive artistic rhetoric is, in reality, reserved for artists with left wing sympathies, yet upholds that artists like Karpe Diem are allowed artistic freedom 'because we know them as good and well behaved guys, who also carry positive attitudes'. This discursive dynamic of an aggressive and attacking right, and a more aloof yet defensive left, may itself be indicative of the hegemonic balance on the cultural field. In Bourdieuan terms (1984), the left wing values and sensibilities can be seen as *doxic* at the cultural field, i.e. self-evident and therefore not in need of explication or justification. The political values and the aesthetical sensibilities of the right, on the other hand, are *heterodoxic*, and therefore in need of more amplified explication.



## Discussion and Conclusion: A Cultural Hegemony of the Ideological Left?

In certain respects, the public reception of both 'Who shot Siv Jensen' and 'Magdi's Toyota' do validate the FRP's claim that the established media and the cultural sector are infused with left wing ideology and populated by actors of left leaning. In both cases, hip hop songs expressing explicit antipathy towards the FRP were catapulted into public attention with the help of the media – not least the public broadcaster NRK – and subsequently widely celebrated by the press, not only because of their musical quality but also because of their political explicitness. Counterfactually speaking, hip hop songs lyrically portraying oral sex with young female politicians from the political left are today quite unthinkable in the Norwegian context. It is plausible to assume that such musical ventures would receive a quite different and indeed less celebratory reception in the established media. From this perspective, the populist claim that the cultural field is ideologically biased does appear to have some rooting in reality in Norway.

However, if the perspective is expanded from the cultural field to the media field at large, the picture is more complicated and in need of problematization. The analyses in this study do not support the claim that there is an all-encompassing cultural hegemony of the ideological left in Norway, inherently hostile to the

values and sensibilities of the FRP, or 'the people' (folk flest) they claim to represent. Apart from the NRK, most media in Norway are privately owned and depend on advertising as their primary source of revenue (Medienorge 2016). Although in need of systematic empirical documentation, it is plausible to argue that a substantial part of the media content that is aired and that circulates in Norway – and especially entertainment – is *apolitical yet ideological* in the sense that it promotes values associated with consumerism and neo-liberalism. In this larger picture, explicitly political art makes up a very small part. Hence, from an ideological perspective, one could argue that in the media sphere at large the worldview and values of the right are pervasive, self-evident and therefore hegemonic. If one regarded the media sphere as a *field*, these values are doxic and in no need for explication or justification. The values of the political left on the other hand can be regarded as heterodox. Consequently, various forms of expressive culture, hip hop included, become the vehicle for the amplified explication of 'leftist' values. As shown in this study, the practises and attitudes specific to the hip hop scene, the hip hop aesthetic and the scene's rooting in a general artistic culture make it perhaps *the* form of expressive culture where antagonism against the right wing populist Progress Party is most loudly voiced.

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### Appendix 3: list of informants

- Martin Bjørnensen: rapper, critic and DJ. Writes regular columns and reviews about hip hop music for *Morgenbladet*, *Klassekampen* and a range of other printed or online publications.
- Aslak Borgersrud: rapper in *Gatas Parlament*.
- Øyvind Holen: journalist, critic and author. Has for the past few decades regularly written columns and reviews about hip hop for a range of national print and online publications (Including *Dagens Næringsliv* and *Ballade*). He is also the author of two books about Norwegian hip hop.

Gunnar Greve Pettersen: former rapper in *Spetakkel*, now manager for various hip hop artists including *Lars Vaular*, *Tommy T* and *Vinni*.

Axel «el Axel» Purcell: rapper in *Equicez*, who won the Norwegian Grammy Awards (2003) and recently released the album 'Hardcore/Encore' (2012).

Lars Vaular: rapper. Won Norwegian Grammy Awards in 2009, 2010 and 2011.

Vågard Unstad: rapper in *A-Laget*, columnist and public debater.



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